

2023 Comprehensive Report Recommendations

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Congress

Fund community-based suicide prevention efforts for active-duty service members and their families like Blue Star Support Circles | Upstream Solutions to Crisis funded under the Staff Sergeant Parker Gordon Fox Suicide Prevention Grant Program which is part of Commander John Scott Hannon Veterans Mental Health Care Improvement Act of 2019.

From Health Care Access

As health care access remains a challenge for some military families, particularly when there is a severe shortage of mental health care providers,¹ the nation needs creative solutions to support the mental health of our service members, Veterans, and their families. In particular, active-duty service member and Veteran suicide has been a significant issue for far too long and continues to devastate our military and Veteran community. National efforts such as the VA's National Strategy for Preventing Veteran Suicide² and the White House's National Strategy³ to reduce military and Veteran suicide engage everyone — individuals, communities, organizations, and government, to *Do Their Part* to address this national crisis. These plans specifically include community-based outreach prevention strategies, because preventing suicide requires strategies at all levels — policies, programs, services, and outreach.⁴

Blue Star Families, a recipient of the Staff Sergeant Parker Gordon Fox Suicide Prevention Grant Program from the VA through the Commander John Scott Hannon Veterans Mental Health Care Improvement Act of 2019, provides an innovative community-based outreach prevention program called Blue Star Support Circles | Upstream Solutions to Crisis. Through this program, we empower military and Veteran friends and family members to recognize, understand, and intervene with their service member or Veteran before their struggle becomes a crisis. While this non-clinical approach does not replace critical clinical mental health care, empowering loved ones to step in to support their Veteran or service member can address a growing mental health concern before it becomes a suicide crisis.

This program offers facilitated, non-clinical, closed-group cohorts for supporters of Veterans and service members. Over eight weeks, participants engage in virtual sessions designed to foster peer-based connections, deliver evidence-based training, and provide resources and referrals. The program empowers participants to effectively support their Veterans or service members.

Family members and friends are uniquely positioned to identify and support a Veteran or service member heading toward crisis.⁵ Empowering those family members and friends with knowledge about suicide prevention, tangible and evidence-based strategies and resources that will decrease suicide risk can provide a targeted, personal upstream solution to prevent suicide for at-risk Veterans. However, in order to advance suicide prevention for Veterans, we must first address suicide risk in active-duty families. Expanding this innovative, community-based, personalized approach to suicide prevention to include active-duty families further enhances the ability to get far upstream of the Veteran suicide crisis.



GI Bill for Child Care: an innovative public-private partnership pilot program to address the initial barriers to employment for military spouses — unaffordable child care — through providing care scholarships to unemployed military spouses.

From Spouse Employment/Child Care

There is a well-documented link between spouse employment and financial security, but child care costs often make it financially unfeasible for spouses to participate in the workforce, especially after a relocation. Relocation often means unemployment for military spouses, and for many, a Permanent Change of Station (PCS) move is accompanied by thousands of dollars in unreimbursed costs,⁶ making post-PCS an especially vulnerable financial time. Continued, repeated lapses in employment with each PCS can greatly impact career trajectory and lifetime earnings for the spouse and family, and the longer spouses are out of work, the harder it is to return.

While there are several child care resources for military families, such as subsidized care at military Child Development Centers (CDCs) or Family Child Care Centers (FCCs), and fee assistance programs, these solutions do not work or are not available for every family, and are often inaccessible for spouses who are not already employed. Unemployed military spouses seeking to return to the workforce are at a lower priority for available military child care programs than their employed peers,⁷ and limited child care slots often mean this child care option is effectively inaccessible. Only 20% of spouses with a need for child care for work use CDCs, only 5% use FCCs, and just 11% utilized the fee assistance program. While child care is a national problem not limited to military families⁸ and efforts to address child care affordability and availability are currently underway,⁹ a variety of innovative solutions are needed to address this multifaceted problem.

Blue Star Families proposes a grant program called the GI Bill for Child Care which would make it possible for spouses to reenter the workforce as soon as they are ready to look for work by providing fully paid child care beginning on day one of their job search. Modeled on the education GI Bill, the GI Bill for Child Care program would provide a "scholarship" of up to \$15,000 for each child. These funds would be directly paid to the child care centers, not the families, just like the GI Bill funds go directly to the colleges and not to Veterans or dependents. This support would continue for a predetermined time frame after spouses find employment, allowing families to build up a financial buffer before needing to pay for the child care. Once they have established employment, families could then transition to existing child care fee assistance programs, extending the benefit of this on-ramp into employment.

Lowering the barriers that prevent consistent employment and career growth for military spouses can simultaneously address a top issue for military families as well as alleviate several other concerns — including financial stability and food insecurity. Providing an on-ramp to employment, particularly after a PCS, can set families up on a trajectory to financial stability and independence, stabilizing and sustaining the All-Volunteer Force.



Department of Defense

From Food Insecurity

Create an awareness campaign to increase military families' knowledge of the BNA program, eligibility criteria, and application process. The campaign should also address the stigma of food insecurity — both social and career stigma — to remove the barrier to accessing food assistance.

The Basic Needs Allowance (BNA) was established in the FY2022 NDAA¹⁰ to address the persistent problem of military family food insecurity. Initially, the program targeted military families whose income falls below 130% of the federal poverty line; however it was quickly modified to 150% in the FY2023 NDAA and authorizes the defense secretary to increase this benefit to 200% of the poverty line when appropriate.¹¹ While there are many community support programs to provide food assistance, not all military families who are food insecure are eligible, and often these programs do not address what are often the root causes for military families — spouse unemployment and relocations.^{12,13} There also continues to be stigma surrounding food or financial insecurity¹⁴ both socially and professionally due to the perception that it will negatively impact a service member's career, which can discourage many families from applying for assistance. Families may also be discouraged from using this benefit due to the potential to lose other nutritional assistance benefits such as SNAP and WIC,¹⁵ as well as Family Supplemental Subsistence Allowance¹⁶ in some overseas locations, due to BNA adding to a families' taxable household income.

The BNA application process is not streamlined amongst the services and each branch has a different process with varying applications and signature requirements.¹⁷⁻²⁰ Furthermore, service members must interact with their chain of command in the application process which can deter them from applying due to concerns of the potential negative ramifications that may impact their career. In previous research in regards to financial assistance and the barriers associated with seeking support, 16% of active-duty family respondents reported the "desire to avoid chain-of-command involvement" as a barrier to seeking financial relief.²¹

At the time of survey fielding, May to July of 2023, about six months into program availability, only about half of survey respondents were aware of the benefit, and few had used it. To encourage eligible families to apply for the BNA, the DOD should create an awareness campaign to increase military families' knowledge of the benefit, eligibility criteria, and how to apply. This campaign, building on already published materials about the program,²² should effectively use social media and other outlets that would promote the availability of the program, and specifically educate families on this benefit by clearly explaining eligibility criteria and what information is factored into the determination of award or denial. It should also serve as a tool to further inform families on how accepting this benefit, if applicable, could affect their other nutrition assistance benefits and empower families to make the best decision to support their families needs.

Similar to Feeding America's Hunger Action Month Campaign,²³ the DOD's campaign should specifically and effectively highlight when our military's basic necessities are met, futures are nourished, and families are not just simply living, they are thriving.

Recommendations



Increasing knowledge of the program and reducing the social stigma barriers to participation can enhance utilization of this program to alleviate food insecurity and ensure adequate nutrition for our nation's military families, continuing to reinforce the message that the military is focused on "Taking Care of Our People."²⁴

From Social Ties

Maintain and expand the Defense Health Administration funding to promote the health and well-being of our nation's service members and their families through inclusive outdoor activities on public lands and waterways.

Providing opportunities for military families to connect with others, especially in-person, can support their well-being. These beneficial effects could be further multiplied, however, by also engaging in outdoor activities. Outdoors activities have demonstrated mental and physical health benefits,^{25,26} and the potential for fostering environmental stewardship, as well as developing a sense of belonging and community for military families.

In a collaborative partnership, Wilderness Inquiry and Blue Star Families are supporting military family wellbeing by providing opportunities for family bonding, stress relief, and personal growth. Military Families Outdoors creates inclusive outdoor environments that contribute positively to the overall health and resilience of military families. This multifaceted approach to accessing outdoor spaces is designed to enhance the well-being and overall quality of life for active-duty military families through various means related to outdoor experiences, mental health, environmental awareness, and social welfare.

Access to Outdoor Spaces: Regardless of where military families are stationed, they can find reprieve in the natural world through local parks, community green spaces, or national parks near their current duty station.

Mental Health and Wellness Benefit: By forming supportive social bonds contributing to their overall wellbeing and mental health, the time spent in the outdoors provides for a therapeutic outlet and another unique way of coping with the stressors of military life.

Encouraging Healthy Lifestyle Habits: Engaging in outdoor activities such as hiking, camping, and exploring national parks and waterways, families can develop positive habits that contribute to their physical health and emotional resilience.

Educating Families on Becoming Environmental Stewards: Educating military families on the importance of preserving and protecting our natural world fosters a sense of responsibility and respect for the environment and empowering families to take a role in conservation efforts.

Positive Engagement Experiences: While these activities and interactions may be defined as recreational, they are enriching and fulfilling which promote family bonding and individual growth.



With greater access to inclusive outdoor activities, military communities will have an enhanced overall health and will foster a stronger connection to the natural world and to one another. Adopting and expanding programs like Military Families Outdoors can support military families' social, physical, and mental health, enhancing their resiliency.

Department of Education

From EFMP

Develop a digital IEP that parents and schools have access to for ease of portability.

Despite requirements from both U.S. Department of Education's Individuals with Disabilities Education Act²⁷ and the Military Interstate Children's Compact Commission (MIC3),²⁸ our research and others,²⁹⁻³¹ finds that services and accommodations for children with Individual Education Plans (IEPs) do not seamlessly transfer from one state to another. This is particularly relevant for military children, who transfer schools on average six to nine times between kindergarten and 12th grade, which is three times more than their civilian peers.^{32,33} Nearly two-thirds of active-duty families (62%) with a child who had a special education plan reported their oldest child with a special education plan changed schools since they received that plan.

Transitioning schools can be a challenge for all children, regardless of special education needs, but one way to make the transfer easier for families with these needs is through streamlining the documentation process through a digital IEP. This digital portal, accessible to both parents and schools, could ease the documentation transfer process when transitioning to the gaining school systems. This initiative, in fact, has already been proposed in the President's FY2024 budget, calling for a \$10 million investment in developing innovative technology tools to that would "support the seamless transfer of IEP documentation from one school district to another when students move from one school district to another and to provide interim access to needed services and supports for children during such moves."³⁴ Military children were specifically in this request due to their frequent moves.

While this does not address a lack of services available or lack of funding in the new school system to make those services available, it does address the first challenge of adequately transferring documentation. Organizations like MIC3 and school systems should educate parents that this digital record is not a guarantee of services and accommodations available to their child(ren) at the gaining school system, but does provide clear documentation for the schools to expedite the development and implementation of the gaining school system's IEP.



States/Localities

From Housing/Relocation

Encourage state and localities to use tax increment financing (TIF) districts to develop new and affordable housing.

Affordable housing is a challenge everywhere, but it is unique to military families because of the frequency of their relocation, and their limited ability to decide where and when they will relocate. Increasing the supply of affordable housing, then, can support military families struggling to find housing that meets their needs within their BAH budget.

One method used across the country to encourage the development of affordable housing is through tax increment financing (TIF) districts. Tax increment financing (TIF) is a dynamic financing tool used as a subsidy for redevelopment, structure, and other community developments.³⁵ Using this tool, local governments redirect future property tax revenue increases from a TIF district toward a public improvement project or an economic development project in the community to allow for the finance of these projects.³⁶

In recent years, there have been multiple ways that localities and states have used TIFs to develop affordable housing in their communities. One way is by promoting housing and commercial development within commercial centers with the coexistence of one another, expressly using the funds from the TIF districts for affordable housing or to designate a certain percentage of the funds be used towards affordable housing.³⁷ Massachusetts' Executive Office of Housing and Livable Communities has the Urban Center Housing Tax Increment Financing (UCH-TIF) program, which permits cities and towns to allow "real estate exemptions on all or part of the increased value (the "Increment") of improved real estate."³⁸ This program was specially designed for the mixed use and urban development of commercial centers for multihousing units. One of the stipulations of the agreement specifies affordable housing must be created and includes a restriction which ensures that "25% of the housing assisted by the exemption will be affordable for 40 years or the useful life of the housing, whichever is longer."³⁹

Another example, in the State of Maine housing authority, MaineHousing, created the Affordable Housing Tax Increment Financing (AHTIF) program in 2004 to fund instructure costs and to support affordable housing initiatives.⁴⁰ Some eligibility requirements of the project include the following: "33% of the housing units in AHTIF district must be for households earning no more than 120% of area median income, and the affordability of rental units must be maintained for at least 30 years, and the affordability of homeownership units must be maintained for at least 10 years."⁴¹ These requirements ensure affordability for families into the future. Both Massachusetts and Maine are examples of how military communities could place requirements such as stating that 33% of housing units need to be occupied by military families, adding more affordable housing options to these families.



In 2006, Portland, Oregon, created the Tax Increment Financing Set-Aside Policy that makes it mandatory to spend 30% of funds collected from all the TIF districts created in Portland on housing affordable to lowincome and workforce residents.⁴² In the first five years alone, it generated more than \$152 million in direct investment housing for people with disability, seniors, working families and low-income households earning at or below 80% of the medium family income were "high priority for the City of Portland as the Portland Housing Bureau implements its equity agenda and Fair Housing Action Plan."⁴³ Utilizing this example, a military community could designate the profits toward housing developments with the addition of military families in mind. This could mean building affordable housing near military installations that were too cost prohibitive before, but can now be reasonably built due to the TIF district funding.

While each one of these examples could benefit the communities surrounding military installations, a combination of the three would greatly reduce the burden of finding affordable housing for military families all the while providing a variety of options from urban to residential. By obtaining affordable housing in their preferred location, families would also be able to financially and emotionally thrive.

Organizations

From Spouse Employment/Child Care

Join the 4+1 Commitment: The Formula for Military Spouse Success.

Military spouses have faced an unemployment rate of 20% or higher for many years.⁴⁴ Blue Star Families first reported on this critical and long-standing issue in 2009, with the very first Military Family Lifestyle Survey. Furthermore, research indicates a strong connection between spouse employment and financial security⁴⁵ as moving every two to three years makes it difficult for spouses to maintain steady employment. When 1 in 5 (21%) of active-duty family respondents report that civilian spouse employment challenges are a primary reason their family would leave the military, addressing spouse employment is a matter of national security. In order to sustain our All-Volunteer Force, we must rethink the solutions to this intransigent problem.

Frequent relocation is a key contributing factor to the high spouse unemployment rate. One in 6 (16%) active-duty spouse respondents who need or want paid employment report "I am recovering from a PCS move" as a reason they are not currently employed. "Blue Star Families and Hiring Our Heroes hypothesize that retaining military spouses through a military move will drastically and immediately alleviate chronic unemployment and underemployment."⁴⁶ On December 6, 2023, Blue Star Families in partnership with Hiring our Heroes announced the *4+1 Commitment: The Formula for Military Spouse Success*, designed to solve the long-standing crisis in military spouse employment.



The 4+1 *Commitment: The Formula for Military Spouse Success* is a scalable, actionable, and effective way for companies to make a voluntary commitment to improving military spouse employment outcomes.^{47,48} The initiative underscores the important role employers can take in supporting the military spouse community by asking them to adopt at least one of the following military spouse-ready policies, plus consider joining an existing government program:⁴⁹

- ★ Facilitate job transferability
- ★ Offer remote or telework
- ★ Offer flexible work hours
- ★ Provide paid or permissive Permanent Change of Station (PCS) leave

+1: Consider joining existing government spouse employment programs such as the DOD's Military Spouse Employment Partnership (MSEP) or Military Spouse Career Accelerator Pilot (MSCAP).

These components are reinforced by Hiring Our Heroes' research and experience, as well as initial phase of Blue Star Families' groundbreaking, three-year longitudinal study of policies, practices, and conditions that effectively support long-term military spouse employment.⁵⁰ The reception from organizations to address the unemployment crisis is positive.⁵¹ By building on this innovative public-private partnership, we believe that military spouses will be able to build careers that will support the well-being of their families, emotionally and financially, and also benefit the stability of the All-Volunteer Force.



Endnotes

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